

Interview with Reinaldo Iturriza



Reinaldo Iturriza, Minister of Communes and Social Protection, Venezuela

On the People, Representation, and Revolutionary Culture

George Ciccariello-Maher, Counterpunch, USA, 15 May 2013

I conducted the following interview with Reinaldo Iturriza, Venezuela's New Minister of Communes, in the aftermath of Hugo Chávez's re-election on October 7th 2012, but two factors have increased its relevance for the present moment: first, the tight margin of victory in Nicolás Maduro's election on April 14th 2013, which points toward a sharpening of the conflicts Iturriza notes below; second, the fact that Iturriza himself was recently named to Maduro's cabinet as Minister of Communes. I have edited the interview for clarity and relevance. Iturriza's description of his first days as minister can be found [in Spanish on his blog](#).

GCM: How do you see the political scenario in the aftermath of Hugo Chávez's re-election on October 7th 2012?

RI: What is interesting to me about the political situation is that October 7th wasn't the overwhelming victory that some polls were predicting, but nor was it the technical tie that the opposition had been claiming. We need to recognize there are deficits, things that aren't working, there is a certain exhaustion of the model, which doesn't mean that we've entered into a phase of decline, nothing of the sort, but simply that there are things that aren't working.

In this sense, there are several things that we need to discuss. First, the subject of representation. It seems like a waste of time to plunge yet again into the question of bureaucracy and the PSUV [[United Socialist Party of Venezuela](#)], internal elections, internal democracy, the need to democratize, to listen to the bases. We can say all of those things, but the problem isn't the actually existing Party. The Party *is* a problem but it won't necessarily be solved with new faces, by getting rid of so-and-so.

I think that what we need to identify is a political *logic*, a *way* of doing politics. The Bolivarian Revolution cannot be understood without a critique of the idea of political representation. In fact, this was put forth explicitly during the first years of the Revolution, which has in a series of opportunities attempted to resolve the problem of the *instrument* [i.e. the Party]. I believe that at this point, we need to recognize that this problem was not resolved, and insofar as it hasn't been resolved, we need to return to these original debates on the crisis of representation.

GCM: So the question of internal democracy isn't going deep enough?

RI: It's about a political *logic*, and we need to identify the concrete practices that define that logic. If we say, "we don't want the endogenous right [moderate Chavistas] any more" we aren't saying anything, because we aren't identifying a *way* of doing politics. We need to identify in detail a *practice*, a set of practices, what could be called an "apparatus" [*dispositivo*], a way of understanding politics, and it seems to me that all of this passes through the question of representation, as Foucault would say "speaking for others." The Bolivarian Revolution is the creation of those who didn't have a voice, it is the process through which the people, the vast majority who never had the possibility of speaking could speak, the historically invisibilized made themselves visible.

What I call "officialism" invisibilized part of the people once again. We can look the other way if we want, but this has a political cost, and this political cost in Venezuela is fundamentally expressed through elections. Venezuelan elections are

not a concession we are making to liberalism: elections are referendums in which not only Chávez or the homeland is at stake, but the process as a whole, which is subjected to permanent elections.

When we evaluate Chavista mayors and there is abstention, it is because the people don't believe in them, because they are terrible, because they turn their backs on the people, because they have thirty bodyguards, because they aren't in close contact with the *barrios*. When we don't vote, we aren't saying that they aren't resolving our problems or their administration is bad, we are evaluating the process as a whole: the way these mayors do politics is a lot like what existed before, and I don't believe in that.

Chavistas protest with their votes, and I believe this was expressed on October 7th. Despite its effectiveness as an electoral machine, the PSUV doesn't manage to convoke the people, it isn't imbricated with the popular masses, it doesn't do mass work, it doesn't do political work. The people don't identify with this party, they identify with Chávez, which is a completely different thing.

I have seen the most radical critiques of the PSUV right now during this campaign. I visited Valles del Tuy and I didn't know there were places that were so Chavista, huge areas with tens of thousands of residents, and they are *radically* Chavista. But those people don't want anything to do with the Party or with mayors, they vote for Chávez. Elections are moments when the process as a whole is evaluated, so when we're talking about the margin of victory, about where there was abstention or not, we are evaluating the entire process.

In the [Great Patriotic Pole](#), which was not simply supposed to be an alliance of parties, and which succeeded in collecting the discontented and dispersed elements of Chavismo, nevertheless reproduced the same thing, and so it's important to determine what that logic is. And it's not enough to identify a logic, we need to identify practices. So this is [relevant to your book](#), when you discuss the moment when the left begins to revise its understanding of vanguardism. Because this remains intact today, the very vanguardist idea that I'm the one who knows and that the problem with the revolution is that the people don't understand, the people aren't at the height of my theory.

GCM: There is a tendency to dismiss the people as bearers of false consciousness?

RI: Yes, and with all that might exist of this, I think the point is exactly the opposite. I believe that there's a Chavista political class that is *very* far behind popular consciousness. I'm not trying to reproduce a romantic view in which the people

know everything, not at all. I'm talking about the Chavista people in all their misery, who have time and again shown their political clarity.

GCM: Like in resisting the coup of April of 2002?

RI: Exactly, and like October 7th too.

GCM: So it's not as simple as critiquing the PSUV or building an alternative?

RI: No, because despite the votes won by the smaller parties, the problem is how to do politics with the 6.5 million who voted for the PSUV. Who are those 6.5 million? *That's* where Chavismo is, popular Chavismo is *there* voting for the PSUV, despite not recognizing themselves in it. Why? Because that's the party of Chávez. The votes won by other parties were important and significant, but for example for the [Venezuelan Communist Party](#) (PCV) to say those 500,000 votes were their militants or the result of their political work... you can't be very serious about politics and say things like that.

That is very common in Venezuela, to say, "that was thanks to me." *Hermano*, you need to put yourself on the level of the people. We are too lacking in humility, we need to really get inside the people and listen to what the people are thinking, what they are feeling, what is bothering them, why they vote or why they don't. But in terms of representation and of the Party there's none of this. No one should be taking credit for what isn't theirs, and insofar as this happens, it means we haven't overcome that defect inherited from the traditional left.

GCM: So the question isn't one of rejecting the PSUV and creating another structure, but of first understanding why people vote for it. This reminds me of when C.L.R. James' critiqued Trotsky for arguing that Stalin had simply duped the workers.

RI: Yes, C.L.R. James would say something very similar about Venezuela, but what you raise is also very important because what is happening in Venezuela isn't unprecedented, it's more or less the history of the left. You need to get your teeth into it, to work on it, to think it through, and to think it through *popularly*. The key in Venezuela is the category of the popular [*lo popular*]: how it is expressed, how it is translated. Instead of trying to *represent* the social base of the revolution, I believe that what needs to be done is to give the people the free rein to express themselves. How? Well, that's the political challenge we have ahead of us.

It's not that we can't be critical, but we need to make sure our critique is on target, because what if we take the ideal situation of the radicals and we replace the PSUV

with something that winds up being the same thing? We replaced the MVR [[Fifth Republic Movement](#)] with the PSUV, and Chávez's early speeches about the PSUV were historic speeches about making it the party we all want. So then why did it become what it is? Not because I say so, but because the people don't identify with it.

GCM: Do you believe that among the leadership of the PSUV there exists the will, capacity, or culture to look at things this way?

RI: On the intellectual level, I would say no, I don't see it among what is often recognized as the intellectual stratum of Chavismo. I *do* see many people building, experimenting with organizational forms, working all the time, inventing, and I believe that there is a disjunction between that stratum and those practices. It's not that nothing is happening: there is *a lot* happening, but we aren't *understanding* it. My perspective isn't that of the traditional pessimistic observer, no, I'm telling you that some extraordinary things are happening and we are missing them.

So there is unhappiness with the party, and this needs to be resolved. I might not agree with how things are being understood, but I need to link up with a machinery that functions effectively, but which we also need to work on so that it functions more like a *popular* machine.

What's the difference between a traditional machine and a popular machine? In Petare, which we lost as a parish but won in the popular *barrios*, with significant reductions in abstention, what the *compañeros* told me was that one of the phenomena that emerged is that people were organizing and working for Chávez's victory without expecting anything in return. The people are no longer waiting for the Party to provide propaganda, the people are taking care of things as well as they can with the few resources they have, but they aren't waiting for anyone, they are *activated*.

The question of representation includes all of this, because it's a question of culture, and this connects to the question of the middle class, to how the Revolution has not been able to communicate with or persuade the middle class. I *do* believe that the revolution has the obligation to do work for the middle class: the middle class must be won. But it's obvious that this can't be the main work of the revolution, although this isn't obvious for some people.

There are people who during the campaign said that there is a discontent within Chavismo, but that this was within the middle class. No, *pana*, the discontent is fundamentally in the popular sectors! And that's your foundation, your social base! I don't understand this view, I think it's a very middle-class way of looking at the

question of the middle class, and I think what we need to do is to focus on the popular question.

The institutions are in the hands of the middle class, politics is directed by the middle class. I'm not saying that this is necessarily bad, but it's a fact, that's how it is: the institutions are in the hands of people who have been educated in a certain way, who have certain values and prejudices toward the popular sector, and on the cultural level this seems absolutely clear to me. It is expressed in the movies and television programs we make, in the literature we create, it is expressed generally in the field of culture.

GCM: Is the idea that the poor are already with us because they are attached to Chávez, so we need to focus strategically on winning the middle class?

RI: Yes, because as some people would put it, "the people have benefited tremendously from the revolution." What the hell is that? That isn't what has happened here. This isn't to imply that the people *haven't* benefited, but that firstly, the people *won* this and have defended it and defended Chávez when they put him back in power after he was overthrown in April 2002, when they resisting the oil sabotage [December 2002-January 2003] and opposition *guarimbas* [street blockades that emerged in 2004]. If the people have done all this, it is because they believe that this government needs to be in power for them to continue to advance, to have the right to keep winning new rights.

But to return to the question of political logic and representation, it's clear that officialism, which doesn't mean the entire government or all the ministers, is a practice. What is this practice? Contempt for the people, privileging clientelistic relations instead of political relations, seeing the people as beneficiaries rather than as protagonists. You hear this all the time in public media: "beneficiaries, beneficiaries, beneficiaries."

Where are the popular aesthetics? Where are the properly popular discourses? Where are the people making their own programs? Where is popular film? This is a very delicate and polemical subject, because it touches on the question of delinquency, but there you have [the notoriously violent homemade film] *Azotes del Barrio*, a scandalous and abominable thing that can't be mentioned in middle-class Chavismo. There are many of those cultural codes, that middle-class imaginary that is still prevalent.

The popular sector appears in the public media in Venezuela as beneficiaries, as recipients of our good efforts. If they complain it's because they are ungrateful, and so they don't complain, I deepen the clientelistic relation, I give them everything,

but only so they won't complain. And all this reproduces a profoundly anti-popular logic.

GCM: This is very similar to the question of the buhoneros, or street vendors, who many Chavistas dismiss as petty-capitalists or even lumpen. We saw this as well in the 2011 London riots when people on the left [like David Harvey](#) dismissed the rioters as a reflection of savage capitalism. There is a tendency in the history of the left, or a certain kind of Marxist orthodoxy, that says that there is a historical subject, and those black people selling drugs on the corner aren't it, that street gangs have no political relevance. You have been involved in the [Chávez Es Otro Beta movement](#), which seeks precisely to reclaim, dignify, and resignify the negative aspects of barrio youth culture. Has there been resistance to Otro Beta?

RI: Within Chavismo? Not publicly, but of course there has. The PSUV in Petare *detests* the kids from Otro Beta because they are political competition, but beyond the question of political quotas and their fear of losing influence, there is also prejudice—prejudice, *chamo*! And it's a *class* prejudice! They behave like an elite. It's that same culture all over again, George, vanguardism, the same old thing, *la misma vaina*. But now it's people who dress in red and repeat everything Chávez says that consider themselves the vanguard. They aren't a vanguard at all, and that's why the people don't respect them.

GCM: This cultural prejudice among Chavistas has left the door open to the opposition, which has for years strategically targeted barrios like Petare with sports programs. While some argue that the strategy has failed, others claim that the opposition has made serious inroads into Chavismo's urban base. How do you see the situation?

RI: There is a powerful political, cultural, and economic potential that is being wasted simply because we don't like the music they listen to, we don't like the way they talk, we don't like how they dress, because they are abandoned to the market, they are alienated... But that's not all: how is it possible that the prison population in Venezuela has more than doubled since 2005 due to the criminalization of micro-trafficking? How is this even conceivable in a revolution? So you have *muchachos* in prison for smoking marijuana. Inconceivable!

GCM: The recent crisis in Venezuelan prisons led Chávez to create a new Ministry of Penitentiary Affairs in 2012. What is your opinion of the Minister, Iris Varela, who has been committed to halting imprisonment and releasing as many inmates as possible?

RI: She doesn't have the support of the penal system as a whole, and is in permanent conflict with the attorney general and the entire judicial structure. But I have been very impressed with her, because the first thing she did was to travel to *all* the prisons and listen to what the prisoners had to say. That seemed absolutely correct to me, it was what had to be done, and that Iris deserves a lot of respect for that. There's still a great deal to be done to fight the mafias, and there are still riots and massacres.

GCM: Do you believe it's possible to humanize prisons?

RI: Absolutely: in revolution, anything is possible, and I don't mean that as a cliché.

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